DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 103 912 CS 201 981

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TITLE Some Insights from Linguistics for the Teaching of Literature.
PUB DATE 75
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the 1975 TESOL Conference

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Educational Philosophy; *English Instruction; Higher Education; *Language Instruction; Language Skills; Language Usage; *Linguistics; *Literature; *Reading Comprehension; Reading Materials; Written Language

ABSTRACT

Linguistics and literature are sometimes perceived as competing disciplines, perhaps even hostile ones. Hence, university courses in linguistics are often shunned by teachers fond of literature. Yet insights derived from an objective study of language can help teachers clear the way to students' understanding and enjoyment of literature. Passages from literature and other advanced reading materials are considered from the classroom teacher's point of view. The paper suggests how teachers can make use of certain concepts familiar to linguists (e.g., function words and content words as related to sentence rhythm; the effects of typography upon students' perception of sentence parts; the concepts of deletion and recoverability). Special attention is directed to problems of reading comprehension which result from a writer's rhetorical ventriloquism. (Author)

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SOME INSIGHTS FROM LINGUISTICS FOR THE TEACHING OF LITERATURE

Years ago, while I was working toward a Master's degree in literature and creative writing at a certain large university, there was a campus rumor that was never verified, but I suspect it was virtually true. It was rumored that the English Department maintained a file which was labeled "Saving the Humanities." The file was said to deal with strategies for defending literature against the onslaught of linguists, who were bent on desecrating our English literary heritage.

Perhaps there has been a change since those days. It may be that literature no longer feels threatened by linguistics. It may even be that the two fields of study are now seen, on both sides, to be complementary disciplines, not competing ones. I hope so. Yet there is not much evidence to support that hope. When English-teaching graduate students join me at registration time to plan programs leading to the Master's degree, there is still a noticeable shying away from linguistics courses, especially among teachers expressing a particular fondness for literature. This happens whether the teacher is in TESOL or working with native speakers of English. Among teachers generally, what linguistics can contribute to literary studies is not widely known. It seems worthwhile, then, to identify insights derived from an objective study of language which, in my experience, have enhanced the study and teaching of literature.

The first insights emerged from the linguistics of the 1940's and '50's. From the courses of that era, dealing with the work of linguists like Bloomfield, Fries and Sapir, came the revelation that writing is a representation of speech. This might seem too self-evident to be called a revelation; yet if I had

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ever seriously viewed writing as a representation of speech, I had overlooked some important implications.

As a fledgling poet-cum-literary scholar, many of my years had gone into the study of writing, but I had no systematic knowledge at all of speech. Or of aspects of spoken English which cannot be represented by our writing system. Or of specific correspondences between speech sounds in various dialects and their written representations. Thus, throughout a dozen youthful readings of Little Women, I had puzzled over the heroines' name for their mother, which the author spelled M-A-R-M-E-E. With the dawn of linguistics awareness came the realization that "Marmee" in r-less Boston would sound like "Mommy" where I lived; Bostonian author Louisa Alcott was using the orthography available for symbolizing her family's mode of talk.

This is only one trivial implication of the concept of writing as representation of speech -- the writer's speech, unless otherwise indicated. The more I learned about speech in contrast to writing, the deeper grew my appreciation of the task facing writers, who must make do with a paltry few conventional graphemes (letters and punctuation marks) for creating the semblance of speech. The linguistics of the forties and fifties helped many of us perceive hitherto unnoticed aspects of the speech that writers present to the eye.

It was in linguistics courses that many of us first took note of the rich array of communication signals used in spoken language: the respective roles of voice volume, stress, pitch, pauses, and the interplay among all these. How to choose and arrange words in a passage so as to evoke in a reader's mental ear the rhythms and emphases appropriate to the writer's intention -- that is one of the central problems in literary art. Perhaps

this task would not be made easier for literary artists by acquaintance with the work of Pike, Trager and Smith; but the observations of those and other linguists concerning intonation, stress and juncture are helpful to teachers. They offer ways of accounting for the effects produced by literary craftsmanship.

Another helpful way of looking at language grew out of early contacts with linguistics. In the forties and fifties, one learned that -- for the linguists of that period -- there were basically two kinds of words: Content Words and Function Words. To the student of language at that time, the distinction between Content Words and Function Words was as vital as the difference between stringed instruments and wind instruments is to the student of music.

This way of categorizing words appears not to be universally familiar to English teachers, so a brief explanation may be in order. Content Words are words that change their forms to signal grammatical notions like plurality or past tense. Nouns and verbs are Content Words; so are adjectives. Such words not only are capable of undergoing form changes, but they have a relatively high degree of semantic content; dictionaries provide fairly satisfactory definitions of Content Words.

Function Words, on the other hand, are used chiefly to perform the function of relating Content Words to other Content Words within the sentence. They include prepositions, conjunctions, articles, pronouns, and auxiliaries. In contrast to Content Words, Function Words have relatively little semantic content; dictionaries are seldom helpful in defining them.

Why the impact of this concept upon an English teacher who had formerly viewed the word stock of English as divisible into eight parts of speech? And what is its bearing upon literature?

To find significance in the distinction between Content Words and Function Words, one must again call to mind the axiom that writing is a representation of speech. In speech, Function Words are less likely than Content Words to be said loudly, to carry emphasis or stress. When, for example, the sentence I stand at the door is spoken, the pronoun, preposition and article would normally be said more softly and more quickly than the verb stand and the noun door. The result is this kind of rhythm:

. - . . -

On the other hand, a phrase consisting solely of Content Words, such as cold grey stones, would produce this effect:

- - -

Thus the patterning of syllables carrying different degrees of stress in the spoken language can account for the rhythm of a written passage -- whether in poetry or in prose. There is a direct relationship between the rhythm or cadence of a passage and the placement of articles, prepositions, auxiliaries and other Function Words. All this has a great deal to do with literary craftsmanship, and with discussions of it in literature classes. More explicitly, it helps explain why one phrasing of an idea may be more satisfying to the reader than some other apparently optional phrasing. Consider, for example, the effect produced by the harmonious interaction of syntax, intonation and meaning in this periodic sentence from the King James Bible:

Underneath are the everlasting arms.

Try rearranging the same words:

The everlasting arms are underneath.

Consider, too, Emily Dickinson's lines:

Parting is all we know of Heaven
And all we need of Hell.

If we were to replace Parting with the lexically equivalent infinitive form To part, we would reverse the order of stressed and unstressed syllables. This reversal would remove the pause which is almost obligatory after Parting, and give the line a sing-song lilt:

To part is all we know of Heaven.

Gone is the sense of trauma, drama and awe.

Much more could be said about linguistic insights that clarify perceptions and assessments of literary craftsmanship. But only the most advanced students in TESOL are ready to analyze the dynamics of literature. For the rest, there is a far more modest goal: basic comprehension. How might an objective view of language help the teacher help students understand what they read?

Here again linguistics in the forties and fifties offered useful insights. To understand why many literary passages baffle students, teachers need to know how the conventions of print obscure meanings that would be made clear in speech. When we talk, we use voice volume to call attention to salient points, and we use pauses of varying lengths to create stopping

places between certain sentence parts. In print, there is often nothing visible within a sentence to suggest emphases or breaks between syntactic units. The letters are all of uniform size, whether or not the words they spell would be stressed in speech. The spaces between major sentence parts are no longer than the spaces between words within a phrase.

Take for example the following sentence from Emerson's essay on Love:

What do we wish to know of any worthy person so much as how he has sped in the history of this sentiment?

If spoken aloud, the sentence would sound like this:

What do we WISH to KNOW of ANY WORTHY PERSON // so much as HOW he has SPED in the HISTORY of THIS SENTIMENT?

When a teacher is aware of key differences between speech and its written representation, steps can be taken to minimize the resulting difficulties. Sometimes, when a sentence provides the key to the meaning of an entire passage, the teacher may wish to copy it on the chalkboard in such a form as to suggest pauses and stresses that would have been supplied in speech. Or the teacher may read the sentence aloud, asking the students to note in their text which words are stressed, which ones are linked together, which ones are separated by pauses. Or the students may be given a passage printed in conventional form and asked to re-copy it, spacing it out into word groups corresponding to units of syntax and meaning.

Whatever strategy is used for dealing with problems that arise out of the inadequacy of the writing system for supplying cues absent from print but present in speech, the main point is this: the English teacher who

knows how speech operates is in a position to help students overcome obstacles to understanding what they read.

Insights into other potential obstacles to comprehension occurring in literature have come to ESL teachers through an objective study of the English language. One such obstacle arises out of the tendency of English writers (and speakers) to employ what linguists have called Functional Shift. Through the operation of Functional Shift, a word that students first learned as a noun may in some contexts be functioning as an adjective or a verb. Indeed, in certain contexts a word learned as an auxiliary may be made to play the role of a noun, as in these lines from W. R. Rodgers' "Neither Here Nor There":

> In that land all Is and nothing's Ought;
> No owners or notices, only birds . . .

When the teacher has been made aware of the frequency with which words generally associated with one "part of speech" can be pressed into service for other roles, he can predict and prevent blocks to comprehension among his students.

From an objective study of language, too, teachers may gain a clearer sense of what constitutes the normal, customary word order characterizing English communication in everyday life. This is a word order from which literature often departs. When deviations from the usual word order are readily perceived by the teacher, their students can be guided through comprehension problems.

Problems resulting from word order are not confined to poetry, as in these lines by T. S. Eliot:

Between the conception
And the creation
Between the emotion
And the response
Falls the shadow.

They are also met in prose. This sentence from Steinbeck's story, The Red Pony is one of countless examples:

One fat white cloud he helped clear to
the mountain rims and pressed it firmly
over, out of sight.

For many teachers, then, a major contribution of linguistics during earlier decades was the light it shed upon language as it is actually used in everyday non-literary communication, and upon the way language sounds. Since the education of English teachers had otherwise dealt almost exclusively with the writing system apart from ordinary spoken language, we needed that focus on formerly unnoticed features of speech.

In more recent times, the focus has shifted. Many grammarians and linguists are now directing attention to other concerns. The language courses of the 1960's and '70's have made their own contributions to the work of classroom teachers. Many of today's language scholars are studying ambiguity, for instance, and synonymity, and various ways of paraphrasing an underlying idea. All of these concerns are of interest to teachers of literature.

For those of us who need fresh approaches to problems of comprehension in the reading of literary works, there is a particularly promising area being developed by linguistics today. This deals with the concepts

of deletion and recoverability. It is postulated that in some cases a sentence may be a shortened form of a longer sentence from which certain elements are said to have been deleted. To understand such a sentence, the deleted elements must be recovered. A simple example might be the following:

Cats are domestic animals, and dogs are, too.

This could be derived from the longer sentence,

Cats are domestic animals, and dogs are domestic animals, too.

Acquaintance with the possibility of deletion and recoverability can prove useful when extended discourse is being studied in an English class. Here is an example:

> Among the people whom Columbus knew, it was believed that the world was flat. The ocean was infested with terrifying monsters, which often devoured ships.

For an accurate reading of the second sentence of this text, it is necessary to "recover" the ideas conveyed by the initial ten words of the first sentence. The writer does not mean to say that the ocean actually was infested with terrifying monsters, but that Among the people whom Columbus knew, it was believed that this was true.

Whether or not one chooses to accept the notion that the second sentence has in fact undergone a process of deletion, the concept of deleted elements is helpful. It alerts teachers and students to problems inherent in reading certain kinds of passages -- passages in which certain sentences do not express the writer's own beliefs (or the beliefs he wishes the reader to adopt) even though they seem to do so. If readers are not aware of this difference between intention and apparent meaning, a whole series of sentences may be misread as assertions of fact, when the writer had precisely the opposite purpose in mind.

That is what happened when forty readers were given the following passage to interpret from an essay on "Language and Cognition," by Brown and Lenneberg.

> It is popularly believed that reality is present in much the same form to all men of sound mind. There are objects like a house or a cat and qualities like red or wet and events like eating or singing and relationships like near to and between. Languages are itemized inventories of this reality. They differ, of course, in the sounds they employ, but the inventory is always the same.

Having read this passage, the forty readers were asked:

1. Does this writer seem to believe that reality is present in much the same form to all men of sound mind?
2. According to this writer, is it true that languages are itemized inventories of reality?
3. Does this writer seem to want the reader to believe that the inventory of reality is the same for all languages?

Surprisingly, almost eighty per cent of the forty readers answered Yes to the above questions. They had failed to carry forward from the sentence introducing the paragraph the crucial clause, It is popularly believed, and so missed the ironic intent of the sentences which followed. Apparently, but erroneously, the writers had expected their readers to attribute the second and third statements to naive members of the public, whose misconceptions would shortly be refuted. This of course is common practice in English exposition: the writer starts by setting forth commonly held assumptions and then proceeds to demonstrate how wrong they are.

The many readers who misinterpreted the above passage were native speakers of English. How slim, then, would be the chances of comprehension among students of English as a Second Language. For them, particularly, it is important to demonstrate that there may be an unseen "deleted" sentence-part to be "recovered" and then placed before a statement; the sentence ought not to be accepted as a statement of fact.

What often happens in an essay is that the writer speaks first in his own person to establish the viewpoint he plans to defend. Then, frequently without explicit warning, he gives readers the words of some other, invisible, person who represents a viewpoint quite different from his own. It is up to the reader to discern that a straw man has been set up to express views which the writer is about to discredit. There is surely a threat to reading comprehension in this kind of rhetorical ventriloquism.

In classes where sophisticated materials are being read, teachers need to watch vigilantly for such rhetorical traps. And students should be trained to "recover" the "deleted" elements that will put statements into proper perspective.

As Kottmeyer (1974) points out, "Achieving the kind of comprehension which is involved in securing and retaining vicarious experience by imaginative identification with the writer or with his fictional characters is crucial to the effective use of literature in schools." True, but this statement applies not only to fiction but to exposition as well. When expository prose is being read, students need to achieve "imaginative identification" with the writer's <u>reasoning processes</u>. How can this be done?

One way is to train students to ask themselves: Is there something the writer has said in an earlier part of this passage that should be remembered

and repeated along with the sentences coming after it? What idea does he assume I am carrying along in my mind?

This is a reading habit to be developed through work on increasingly complex passages, starting with obvious uses of rhetorical ventriloquism, as found in the following:

> Some children think that darkness is very frightening.
>
> There are ghosts in the corners of every darkened room.
>
> Every noise is the foot step of a hostile stranger.

In discussing such a passage, the students learn to note the possibility of restoring to certain sentences various elements present in the underlying deep structure but absent from the surface form. By working through a series of progressively more complex passages, they may become aware of the need to view each sentence in terms of its context.

From the standpoint of the English teacher, the current emphasis upon larger contexts is one of the most helpful aspects of present-day linguistics. Before the 1960's, linguists tended to focus attention upon the sentence rather than upon larger texts. Still, from the forties through the seventies, the work of linguists has been rich in implications for a whole generation of teachers. The teacher of literature has much to gain from an objective study of language. If human experience is the WHAT of literature, surely language is part of the HOW.

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